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SUBJECT: Paris Launches Its First Internet Chat on U.S.
Visas to Reach Broader and Younger Audiences: Lessons
Learned

11. Summary. The Mission conducted its first 'Internet chat,' and we are pleased by the public's response. In planning the chat, we contacted several regional posts to learn about their experiences. Few had conducted chats, while others expressed an interest in learning from us. We are, therefore, providing a read-out of our experience for interested parties.

12. The chat's theme was U.S. visas, and we received over 500 questions from the French public. In a fast-paced one-hour information exchange, the Consul General and Consular colleagues, assisted by the Public Affairs Section, answered 40 selected questions, mostly in French. We posted the transcript and used the material for a 'Frequently Asked Questions' site on the Mission website. The Internet-chat mechanism emphasizes USG accessibility for dialogue with French publics, especially for the younger generation. We plan two more chats, on other topics, as part of this pilot project. End Summary.

13. Background: The Public Affairs Section initiated this pilot chat project as an effort to engage directly with a wider French public. We expected a mostly young audience, given that youth are turning to the Internet more and more for their news and information. We selected 'Ask the Embassy about U.S. Visas' as our first program. Consular colleagues enthusiastically agreed to participate in the chat.

14. Logistics: IRM colleagues advised us it would be best to work on the DIN-network, and not the OpenNet Plus system, both for Department security concerns and because of potential slowness of service. We bid out the project to three chat companies in Paris, and selected the company with the lowest price: 3,000 dollars for three chats over the space of a year. The chat company arranged for the chat page to look just like the Mission's website, but the page actually belonged to the private chat company. We posted a picture of the Consul General, his biography, and allowed the public to register their questions in advance. We conducted an off-line trial run a few days previous, answering a few questions to test the system and our responses.

15. Advertising: Ten days before the chat, we began to advertise it by placing a note, in French and English, on the website, by sending the note to selected contacts in our Audience Tracking System (ATS, aka Paris' DRS) who are active in the fields of education or university exchange programs or who are exchange alumni themselves. We contacted selected media, such as the free newspapers, read by a mostly young public, and several radio shows. Lastly, we printed flyers and had them available at the consular offices for visa applicants to take with them.

16. The Chat: We received 280 questions in advance and were able to survey them and select the ones we thought most interesting and worthwhile. During the actual hour-long chat, 187 visitors monitored the discussion, posting 253 new questions for a total of over 500 questions received. The Consul General, another consular colleague, and a fast French typist answered 40 questions over the space of an hour, as Public Affairs staff selected among old and new incoming questions for them to answer. The questions spanned the range of visa concerns: student, transit, business-start-up, au pairs, babies and expiring visas as well as machine readable passports and visas.

17. Audience Profile: We asked the chat company to prepare an optional questionnaire for participants to fill out prior to posting questions. From a pull-down menu, participants were asked to select their gender, age, region of residence, general occupation and field of work. Approximately one-third of participants did not fill out the questionnaire. Of the two-thirds who did, we learned 50 percent of our audience was female, 37 percent male and 13 percent decided not to respond to that particular question. Otherwise, the participants were young. 47

percent were under 30 years of age and 29 percent were from the Paris region. Audiences across France participated, however. Students made up 32 percent of the audience.

18. Follow-Up: We have posted the chat transcript on the website, and are adding a 'Frequently Asked Questions' resource for website posting. We plan on broadening the topics for future chats. All of these chats would be collaborative efforts with Mission colleagues.

19. Embassy Paris is pleased by the response to our first Internet chat. This medium allows us to reach new and younger audiences and to engage them, in French and in 'real time,' about American society, U.S. policies and other issues of interest to the successor generation.
Wolff